

THE IDIOM OF MEDIA IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE COLLABORATOR: A CRITIQUE**Basharat Shameem *****ABSTRACT**

*In the contemporary times, media has acquired a very significant role in shaping and even altering the opinion of public and governments alike. In the politically contested spaces, the significance of media acquires much more proportions especially in the light of multiple narratives and discourses. This paper aims to study Mirza Waheed's novel *The Collaborator* in how it presents a critiquing engagement with the language of media propaganda in how it alters different narratives. The paper seeks to highlight how the novel offers a subtle critique of the propaganda idiom of officially sanctioned media vis-à-vis the armed conflict in Kashmir. The paper draws references from the works of various eminent theorists who have put forward their postulates about the functional and structural realms of the contemporary media.*

Keywords:- The Collaborator, Media, Propaganda, Narratives, Kashmir, Conflict.

Introduction

Among many of its significant themes, Mirza Waheed's novel *The Collaborator* also presents a subtle critique of the language of media propaganda in how it aims to dilute and deny various facts pertaining to the armed conflict in Kashmir. The paper seeks to highlight how the novel offers a subtle critique of the propaganda idiom of officially sanctioned media vis-à-vis the armed conflict in Kashmir. To corroborate its arguments, the paper draws references from the works of eminent theorists who have put forward their postulates about the functional and structural realms of the contemporary media. The media is evaluated in the novel as a state controlled ideological state apparatus acting as a strong reinforcement to the repressive state apparatus which has an overawing control over people.

The novel is loaded with many descriptions in which the idiom of media is closely dissected. This is done in an attempt to show how the language of media acts as a subterfuge to cover the viciousness of military oppression. Scholars like Craig La May conclude that during any period of authoritarian rule, "governments employ strict censorship to control the flow of information to the general public, and journalists exist as mouthpieces for the government" (LaMay 26). This involves the creation of a propaganda language which thrives on a subtle, but quite deliberate misleading and manipulating of various figures and facts considered essential to the memory of the struggling people. As Noam Chomsky points out in his book *Media Control*, in an environment of military oppression, the dominant power considers it "necessary to completely falsify history" as it seeks to justify its ways of oppressive machinations (Chomsky 35). This is usually achieved through a gradual manufacturing of "Goebbalian" opinions and manipulations through media (ibid).

The various historical and political circumstances which determine the Kashmiri resistance narratives enact a pivotal part in devising certain parameters and approaches for its critical study. Waheed's narrative is situated within a definite context, a context which is intersected by the deeply entrenched historical and political factors. These complex historical and political factors transfigure themselves in the shape of a struggle, one which stands itself against military oppression. Frantz Fanon warns us about the debilitating effects of colonialism in his much acclaimed work. *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Colonialism is not satisfied

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merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today" (Fanon 215).

Reflecting on the bleak scenario of 1990s Kashmir, in an interview, Waheed states: "The 90s were a dark, brutal decade with horrific levels of violence and nothing travelled to the outside world with [Pakistan describing] the conflict as jihad and India [describing] it as a law and order problem" (Waheed qtd. in Dawn 2011). In the novel, this is echoed by the words of narrator who says, "You know, sometimes I wonder—because for Kashmir there is always an Indian and a Pakistani version of everything." (*The Collaborator* 15). As Waheed alludes to, these two nation-states had adopted the posture of story-tellers of master narratives in the context of Kashmir.

Many passages in the novel are suggestive of their compelling assertions and contestations with regards to the official documentation of the Kashmiri conflict. It seems the novel aims to drive home the point that the descriptions of the conflict in the official accounts have seldom echoed the happenings on the ground. As a result, many significant facets pertaining to the conflict remain hidden to the outside world. Many stories go unrendered and many pictures go unseen. Waheed takes it upon himself, like many other writers of the resistance movements, in the words of Barbara Harlow, "to consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order" (Harlow 50). In the after word to the novel, Waheed quotes an estimate of 70,000 people killed in Kashmir since the inception of the armed conflict as well as the number of people disappeared, orphaned, and imprisoned. However, he also notes that "the government of India disputes these figures" (*The Collaborator* 305).

Many significant events which happened in the early 1990s are referred to in the novel with an endeavor to re-describe and re-explore them. These events have either been distorted or not been fully rendered to the outside world, owing to the inadequacies of the official accounts of the conflict. Here Waheed's narrative actively engages with the question of restoring the historical memory of the oppressed Kashmiris by bringing it out of the pages of hegemonic power discourses. As critics like Barbara Harlow have found out, this is a characteristic feature of the writings emanating from the marginalized spaces of struggle:

Resistance narratives embedded...in the historical and material conditions of their production and [contain] the allegiances and active participation of their authors...in the political events of their countries, testify to the nature of the struggle for liberation as it is enacted behind the dissembling statistics of media coverage and official government reports... Harlow 98

There are so many references to the important events which happened in the 1990s as the Kashmiri militants, struggling for liberation, and the Indian state, responding with repressive force, were locked in a bitter confrontation. Some of these tragic events are the incidents of mass-rape in Poshpora, mass massacres of Gaw Kadal and Sopore, or the fake encounters on LOC which directly resulted in the existence of mass graveyards near the border. Kunan Poshpora in Kupwara is a village in North Kashmir, where more than 50 women were raped during a cordon and search operation by the 4th Rajputana Rifles of Indian Army on February 21, 1991 while the men were kept in strict internment in a field. Many documentaries have been prepared on the village and these women, and also, numerous national and international teams have carried out their investigative studies. However, the government blatantly denies that any such occurrence ever took place. In the novel, the narrator states in shock: "A brand new Minister for Kashmir Affairs from Delhi was also quoted as saying that no place by the name of Poshpur ever existed on the map" (*The Collaborator* 26). The authorities at that time had out rightly denied that such an

incident ever took place and called the allegations of the women as baseless and propaganda aimed to tarnish the image of army. The women of Poshpur appear as “Milk Beggars” in the novel. Having been under curfew for more than three months, these women come to Nowgam desperately in search of milk for their starving children.

The mass killing incident of GawKadal is also referred to in the novel, in which, according to the narrator, nearly 50 people had been killed by the CRPF in broad daylight as the newspapers were full of headlines as “The River of Blood”: “Young and old, men and children, dead, all dead, dead on a bridge” (*The Collaborator* 117). The government defends the incident as: “There was a breakdown in the law and order situation and the police were forced to open fire on the out-of-control mob; as a result thirty-five people were killed” (*The Collaborator* 117). The novel scoffs at the way an occurrence of massive human tragedy is nonchalantly trivialized as a “law and order situation”.

The Captain’s various references to media, in his conversations with the narrator, seem to be suggestive of the dichotomy between the actual happenings on the ground and the reportage in media. Waheed ingeniously satirizes the language of propaganda in the media about the conflict. This is revealed in the way the narrator’s father scolds the Doordarshan news, India’s national broadcaster, dismissing it as “all lies, *sarasarbakwas*, and utter nonsense” (*The Collaborator* 112). Whenever any armed clash takes place between the army and the militants, many deaths result, but as the narrator describes, it is played down as “a mere “skirmish” (*The Collaborator* 5). There is also the description of fake encounters which are usually stage-managed and pictured through media. When a media team arrives from Delhi for reporting about the conflict, particularly, about the activities on the border, the Captain arrogantly shows off his skill of stage-managing the operations in a conversation with the narrator:

Well, we have this fucking TV crew coming from Delhi, there might be some foreign ladies as well, I have been told. So we will do something here in the camp, you don’t worry about it. The stupid hacks want to film foreign militants ... I can make any maderchod look like an Afghan. The dead don’t speak, remember, and I still have plenty of old photos and clothes.

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After the narrator is forcibly employed by the Captain to do the job of identification of the dead bodies of both the trained militants and aspiring militants trying to cross over the border, he becomes familiar with the machinations of army in the hinterland of Kashmir. Reflecting on his observations of these workings, the narrator says:

And when they want to show off their catch, they film the bodies which have not been conveyed down into the valley, and store the footage for present of future use. *That’s* what we see on T.V. Sometimes, especially when the action has spilled out into the bordering villages, or when they have fake-encountered some poor boys in some far-flung area, they will drag the bodies, after their faces are mutilated, and quickly hand them over to the local police, or to scared, do-gooder villagers for mass nameless burials; that is, after they are done with camera-work etc. But when there’s no such need they will just kick the corpses around and roll them over into the valley

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The narrator comes to know about the actions of Indian army behind the scenes. The reality that is fed through the media is starkly different from the actual truths. The point worth mentioning here is the complicity and connivance of the media in putting up a mask of deception to hide the realities of the military oppression. Not only this, there are many other instances as portrayed in the novel which provide an inkling of how the media, in its language and functioning, attempts to dilute the reality of its essence. In scenarios like these, as philosophers and theorists like Jean Baudrillard point out:

It is the technological structure of media that affects our attitudes, feelings, and thoughts, and that the view that media can serve some ultimate emancipatory end -- e.g., by being more inclusive, by offering more radical or subversive voices in the mix of programming -- is simply delusional. It is also questionable whether the media information produces meaning or whether it destroys it.

qtd in Baudrillard's *Thoughts On Media*

Another instance takes place towards the end of the novel when the Governor visits Nowgamon the Republic Day of India, to address its people, who had been besieged under a strict curfew. The elderly persons, children, and the women under crackdown for three days, present a condition of helplessness and suffering in the extreme cold of January. A woman is seen crying in the crackdown during her menstruation. The scene becomes more ironic as the media persons, accompanying the Governor, provide full coverage to his address, and his pretentious distribution of gifts to the people. However, the pain and agony of the besieged populace goes unnoticed entirely. This stage-managed act of 'goodwill' is carried out to apparently portray a 'calm' picture of Kashmir to the rest of the world, and it is here, that the role of media comes handy for the repressive machinery of the state to achieve such a purpose. In view of the language of propaganda and misinformation in media about the armed conflict in Kashmir, P.A. Sebastian observes, "What is being said about Kashmir in Indian and Pakistani media is not information but a campaign of misinformation and disinformation" (Sebastian 319).

In their joint study, carried out in 1990 in Kashmir, Tapan Bose, Dinesh Mohan, Gautam Navlakha and Sumanta Banerjee refer to a report from Kashmir, published in the February 15 issue of *India Today* which claims to be a first-hand account while its author has not been to Kashmir. As the study notes, the report shows a photo of Jagmohan's meeting with citizens of Srinagar with the background Chinar in bloom which is possible only in summer and in fact, the photo is not from Srinagar but taken around April 1986 at Anantnag (Banerjee, Bose, Mohan, and Navlakha 41). The study also quotes P Upendra, the then India's minister for information and broadcasting, who, in February 1990 had justified the strict imposition of press censorship in Kashmir in view of the "special circumstances, and the delicate situation there." Hence, in such circumstances, the authenticity is often diluted by a subtle use of the language of propaganda which is so aptly highlighted by the novel.

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